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Cleaning up Mt. Um

IT'S A FEDERAL RESPONSIBILITY; CONGRESS SHOULD APPROVE FUNDING

IN 1986, the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District spent \$260,000 for a real fixer-upper, the abandoned Almaden Air Force base atop Mt. Umunhum.

Sixteen years later, the radar facility at the summit is pretty much as it was when the Air Force pulled out. And its splendid views from the ocean to the Diablo Mountains are off limits to the public.

With a little work in Washington the summit could be cleaned up and opened for public use.

Courtesy of U.S. Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, the House version of the defense appropriations bill for the next federal budget calls for Mt. Umunhum to receive some of the money set aside to clean up old military sites. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., is prepared to push the project in the Senate.

The amount being talked about, \$2.5 million, will cover no more than half the cleanup cost, but if the work gets done, the public could enjoy the marvelous vistas from the mountaintop.

Mt. Umunhum, rising behind Los Gatos, is the mountain with the cube on top, the supporting structure for a radar dish that used to watch for Soviet attackers.

The building conjures an image of a handful of hardy souls staring at a radar screen. In fact, it took a village to stand guard. The village is still up there, minus the 150 or so inhabitants.

Just down from the summit are some 50 buildings -- houses, barracks, a gymnasium, a bowling alley and a swimming pool -- all abandoned and deteriorating.

As cleanups of former military installations go, this one is not particularly complicated. Asbestos in the ceiling tiles and lead in the paint appear to be the principal hazards -- easier to deal with than unexploded munitions.

The cleanup is a federal responsibility. The military put the village up there. The open space district paid market rates for the land, with the understanding that the military would remove hazardous materials.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which does this sort of work, took out old fuel tanks and electric

transformers in 1995. Congress should give it the money to finish the job.

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